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Integration of United Nations information centres with field offices of the United Nations Development Programme: continued implementation of the views of host Governments

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The Department of Public Information has continued to implement the views of Member States hosting United Nations information centres integrated with the field offices of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) with a view to strengthening further the efficiency in the implementation of public information activities. At present, there is no pending proposal to integrate any additional United Nations information centre. Should any such request be received, the Department would review it jointly with UNDP and the Government of the host country concerned, prior to submitting it to the Committee on Information for its consideration. It may be noted that, building on their 20-year working relationship, the Department and UNDP continue to look for ways and means of rationalizing the use of the limited resources at their disposal, to improve the delivery of public information programmes and strengthen the unified image of the United Nations worldwide.

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I. Introduction

1. In its resolution 56/64 B of 24 December 2001, the General Assembly took note of the report of the Secretary-General entitled "Integration of United Nations information centres with field offices of the United Nations Development Programme: implementation of the views of host Governments",[1] welcomed the action taken by the Department of Public Information to implement the views of those host Governments as expressed in their replies to the questionnaire provided by the Secretariat, and requested the Secretary-General to take the necessary steps for the continued implementation of those views and to report thereon to the Committee on Information at its twenty-fourth session.

2. Furthermore, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to report to the Committee on Information at its twenty-fourth session on any possible proposal to continue, if feasible and on a case-by-case basis, the integration policy in a cost-effective manner, while maintaining the operational and functional independence of United Nations information centres, taking into account the views of the host countries to ensure that the information functions and the autonomy of United Nations information centres are not adversely affected, to meet the policy's stated objective of improving the provision of information by the United Nations. The present report was prepared in response to those two requests.

II. Continued implementation of the views of host Governments

3. In follow-up to the action reported in paragraph 4 of document A/AC.198/2001/4 with regard to the implementation of the views of one of the host Governments concerned, the Secretary-General proceeded with the appointment of a full-time Director to the United Nations information centre in question and he assumed his duties in August 2001.

4. Further to the action reported in paragraph 5 of the same document, the Department of Public Information, with the active support of the United Nations resident coordinator, provided computers, printers and access to the Internet to 15 university libraries located in that country, to provide the students with online access to United Nations information materials. It also organized a training workshop for librarians from the institutions receiving that service. To build on discussions between the Minister for Foreign Affairs of the host country and the Interim Head of the Department of Public Information last December, and in order to expand that outreach effort during 2002, the Department is in the process of identifying additional university libraries in other parts of that country that could join the programme. It is also exploring the possibilities for further strengthening those initiatives through the development of videoconferencing facilities, among others.

5. With regard to the action reported in paragraph 6 of A/AC.198/2001/4, the Information Assistant in one of the locations concerned was recently successful in the examination for promotion to the Professional category and has been reassigned to a new duty station. In order to further strengthen the United Nations information centre in that location, in addition to this staff member's replacement, the Department is in the process of recruiting a Reference Assistant. Moreover, that United Nations information centre has been instructed to work closely with the

public information component of the United Nations peacekeeping mission located in that country to enhance the outreach of both operations.

6. Taking into account the views of one host Government, as related in paragraph 7 of A/AC.198/2001/4, the United Nations information centre in that capital continued to receive increased resources, which, together with the active support of the United Nations resident coordinator, has strengthened its public information activities and enhanced its outreach. It may be noted that the Department has, as a matter of course, continued its efforts to restore additional resources to those United Nations information centres that have suffered reductions in staffing resources as a result of budget reduction exercises undertaken over the past several years.

III. Proposals for the continuation of the integration exercise

7. Since the integration exercise was launched in 1992, there has been some confusion with regard to both the aims and the implementation of the process, giving rise to concerns among some host countries, as well as within the Department of Public Information and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). To facilitate communication and to ensure that the appropriate action is taken regarding issues relating to the integration exercise, the Department and UNDP created a joint working group in September 2001 to review all aspects of cooperation in the area of public information at the field level. The group's main objectives are to project a unified image of the United Nations and strengthen cooperation through pooling of resources and closer teamwork. The Department and UNDP agreed that they would continue to cooperate through the working group in full respect of the mandates given by the General Assembly, both with regard to public information programmes and to the integration of United Nations information centres with field offices of UNDP. Moreover, owing to the personal efforts of the UNDP Administrator, the United Nations resident coordinators had become increasingly attentive to the important role of public information, resulting in greater cooperation at the field level. The Department and UNDP emphasized that one of the goals of the reforms initiated by the Secretary-General was to project a unified image of the United Nations, and therefore the country teams needed to work in harmony, under one United Nations flag and under the leadership of the United Nations resident coordinator. Within that structure, a United Nations information centre, regardless of whether it was integrated or had a full-time Director from the staff of the Department of Public Information, was a key member of the country team, acting as a focal point for the team's public information activities. Closer cooperation among all United Nations organizations represented in a country, accompanied by a consolidation of efforts and resources, would not only avoid duplication but would also lead to more effective implementation of mandated activities.

8. It should be noted that the 1992 initiative to integrate United Nations information centres with the field offices of UNDP was based on a history of cooperation between the Department and UNDP in the field dating back to the 1980s and culminating in a formal agreement on cooperation in 1990. One of the first objectives of the joint task force established by the Interim Head of the Department and the Administrator of UNDP in 2001 was to review and, if appropriate, update that understanding. That exercise is currently under way.

9. At present, the cooperation between the Department of Public Information and UNDP addresses the following five situations regarding field representation:

(a) A field office of UNDP and a United Nations information centre with a full-time Director from the staff of the Department of Public Information;

(b) A field office of UNDP and a United Nations information centre with the United Nations resident coordinator/representative as Director;

(c) A field office of UNDP but no United Nations information centre;

(d) A United Nations information centre and no field office of UNDP;

(e) A United Nations office with an information component, headed by a United Nations resident coordinator/representative in accordance with resolution 48/209 of 21 December 1993.

10. To ensure effective cooperation in those different situations, the Department of Public Information, with the assistance of UNDP, continues to devise suitable measures with the aim of improving access to information about the work of the United Nations in all the regions of the world. Accordingly, integration is a case-by-case mechanism, not a "one size fits all" solution. The Department and UNDP have agreed that, in all locations where the United Nations resident coordinator is required to carry out public information activities, he/she would report on those activities to the head of the Department of Public Information.

11. With respect to formal integration, both the Department and UNDP are in agreement that any proposal in this regard must be implemented in accordance with the relevant resolutions of the General Assembly, namely, "if feasible and on a case-by-case basis, while maintaining the operational and functional independence of United Nations information centres, taking into account the views of the host countries to ensure that the information functions and the autonomy of United Nations information centres are not adversely affected, to meet the policy's stated objective of improving the provision of information by the United Nations".[2]

12. At this time, there is no proposal pending for the integration of any United Nations information centre with a field office of UNDP. Should any host country present such a proposal, the Department and UNDP would review the feasibility and cost-effectiveness of the measure and, if all the requirements were met, they would jointly initiate consultations with the Government of the host country to make a final decision on implementation.

13. There are currently 17 United Nations information centres formally integrated with the field offices of UNDP: Algiers, Ankara, Antananarivo, Asunción, Bucharest, Colombo, Kabul, Kathmandu, Kinshasa, La Paz, Lomé, Managua, Maseru, Monrovia, Panama City, San Salvador and Yangoon. (In recent years, centres in Kabul, Managua and San Salvador have not been operational.) In addition, in a number of host countries, the Department has sought the cooperation of United Nations resident coordinators in the supervision of United Nations information centres, asking them to perform the functions of Directors, initially on a temporary basis. This practice was in place long before the launch of the formal integration exercise in 1992, and it was usually done pending the appointment of a full-time Director from the staff of the Department upon a reassignment or retirement of the previous incumbent.

14. In recent years, however, as a result of successive budgetary cuts, and following the establishment of new United Nations information centres without the allocation of additional resources for that purpose, many centres have remained without a full-time internationally recruited director. A locally recruited professional runs the daily public information operation of such a centre under the general supervision of the United Nations resident coordinator. In such cases, the Department of Public Information expects the United Nations resident coordinator to enhance the resources of the United Nations information centre for the delivery of the public information programme in full respect of the mandates established by the General Assembly with regard to the public information function, including those relating to the activities of UNDP in the host country concerned, thereby eliminating the need for a separate public information capacity within the local office of UNDP.

IV. Conclusion

15. The Department has taken note, with appreciation, of the efforts made by United Nations resident coordinators in strengthening United Nations public information activities, and in assisting the Department in projecting a unified image of the Organization at the global level.

16. The Secretary-General appreciates the continued support which United Nations information centres receive from their host countries and welcomes the proposals by the Governments concerned to further enhance the effective operation of those centres.

Notes

[1] A/AC.198/2001/4.

[2] See resolution 56/64 B of 24 December 2001.